# Workshop Review: Refining Your Professional Skills

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Abstract

For novice researchers, it is often challenging to know where to begin when it comes time to prepare research findings for presentation. While a wealth of print and online resources is available, the sheer volume may seem daunting. Seasoned researchers meanwhile may wonder if there are emerging trends in applying for and presenting at conferences that they should apprise themselves of. Fortunately, the West Tokyo chapter of Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) recently put on a professional development workshop called "Refining your Professional Skills," which distilled this process into three key elements: writing an abstract, producing a poster, and creating a presentation. The purpose of this paper is to summarize three presentations given on the following topics: "Honing your Abstract Writing Skills" by Jamie Taylor and Wendy M. Gough, "The Nice, the Not-so-nice, and the Terrible," a discussion of poster presentations by Greg Gagnon, and "No More Bullet(s): Presentation Workshop for Academics" by Daniel Beck. Readers should be made aware of the key takeaways of each presentation and be able to incorporate the strategies presented into their own professional development.

## Introduction

The West Tokyo chapter of JALT recently hosted the professional development workshop "Refining your Professional Skills" at Kyorin University in Mitaka, Japan. The audience was treated to an informative, interactive, and often humorous trio of presentations aimed at academics looking for strategies in putting together paper abstracts, conference posters, and presentations which outline their research findings. The tips and strategies presented are of particular interest to new researchers, but also contain very useful ideas that can be put into practice by academics at all stages of their career. This paper will summarize the three presentations and highlight salient points which will likely contribute to the professional development of Center for English Language Education (CELE) instructor researchers.

## Strategies for effective abstract writing

Jamie Taylor and Wendy M. Gough initiated the event with their presentation "Honing your Abstract Writing Skills." As *PanSIG Journal* (representing JALT special interest groups) editors for the past three years, Taylor and Gough noted they have read hundreds of abstracts of varying quality, and their presentation was straightforward, informative, interactive, and drew from their wealth of expertise.

Taylor and Gough began by shedding some light on the inner workings of the submission process, explaining the various steps and their roles as editors. Their initial role is screening submissions to make sure they meet fundamental criteria. Submissions may be rejected at this stage if they do not respect word count guidelines or if they include identifying information about the author(s). Submissions that are outside the scope of the *PanSIG* proceedings will also not make it past this stage, but authors may receive a note of encouragement to submit their abstracts/articles to a more appropriate venue. A submission that meets the base criteria is assigned to two blind reviewers with interest and/or specialization in the relevant field. Reviewers will accept, accept with revision, or reject submissions. Taylor and Gough shared some examples of reviewer comments illustrating how these can be used not only to edit the abstract itself, but to shape the subsequent presentation in a way that will ensure maximum clarity, accessibility, and impact. Taylor and Gough also noted that they screened the reviewer comments and edited them as appropriate to ensure the critiques were constructive and encouraging, noting they particularly did not want to discourage emerging scholars.

Employing a "show" – rather than "tell" – approach, the presenters shared model abstracts followed by less impressive examples. Attendees were paired up and tasked with discussing possible edits to the examples. The edits were then discussed as a group, with authentic reviewer comments presented and analyzed. This was an effective way of illustrating the following best practices in abstract writing:

- Choose a topic that is appropriate for the audience.
- Demonstrate familiarity with current research and practice.
- Make sure the content is theoretically and pedagogically sound.
- Clearly state the intent of the presentation and the intended takeaways for attendees.
- Match the conference theme.
- Organize ideas logically.
- Respect word limits included in the proposal guidelines.

Taylor and Gough explained that effective abstracts follow organizational schemes such as: (a) Background information, (b) Problem addressed, (c) Content of the presentation; (a) Background, (b) Aim/ focus of presentation, (c) Rationale (why?), (d) What the audience will learn (takeaway); or (a) Focus of presentation, (b) Details that clarify presentation focus, (c) Implications for future research (especially for newly emerging research topics.) In all cases, the presenters emphasized that the background information should be minimal, as short as one sentence. The focus of the abstract, they stressed, should be on the presentation's novel content and the audience takeaway.

Conversely, when preparing abstracts, the following should be avoided: choosing a topic that is too large to cover in the allotted time (often only 20 minutes for a conference presentation); submitting an abstract that is too general with no details or specific examples; focusing too much on previous research; using too much technical language or jargon; and failing to proofread.

Although the specific examples Taylor and Gough shared are taken from their roles as editors of *PanSIG Journal*, the excellent suggestions they offered are applicable to crafting effective abstracts for conferences throughout the TESOL field.

**Strategies for effective posters**

The second presentation, by Greg Gagnon was titled "The Nice, the Not-so-nice, and the Terrible." As an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructor working with science and engineering students, Gagnon and his colleagues have incorporated poster presentations as a requirement for all students. Through this, he has extensively researched what makes for an effective poster presentation. Gagnon's informative and humorous presentation emphasized the importance of recognizing posters as an inherently visual medium separate from a paper or a talk; an effective poster tells a story, should be a way to communicate, in simple terms, the scope of one's research, and should be able to stand on its own. Or, as Gagnon quipped, "If I hung a poster outside of my office door, would someone outside of my discipline be able to learn something?"

Gagnon began by introducing effective design features of posters and illustrating them with models. His recommendations included: straightforward design with clear and easily readable fonts (Calibri, Verdana, and Ariel were recommended); fewer than 800 words of text; and concise sentences over bullets. Gagnon explained that a good sentence explains and informs, and the goal is for people to read the poster – it is not a PowerPoint slide. He continued that the abstract with hypothesis should be clear; any technical words or acronyms should be defined; and important points and findings should be briefly summarized. Visually, sections should be clearly labeled; colors should be thoughtfully considered to be clear and easy on the eyes with high readability; pictures should be clear and relevant; graphs and charts should be clearly labeled and simple enough to be readily understood without referring back to text; graphs should use simple keys, bold colors, and easily understandable X and Y axes. Finally, all graphics and images should be the author's own or in the public domain.

Gagnon's recommendations of what not to do when creating a poster were pretty straightforward: Don't make a poster that is crowded, busy, or unclear; Don't use tiny font; and Keep it simple – don't try to include too much information. As Gagnon explained, "if you have that much content, create two separate poster presentations!"

The presentation continued with the "nuts and bolts" of poster creation. Gagnon recommended Microsoft Publisher or Power Point as readily available software tools to create professional-looking posters, with the standard size being 196 cm by 112 cm with 2.25 cm margins (although dimensions are variable and conference guidelines should be consulted). As a practical consideration, he recommends checking on-campus printing options and consulting departmental research budgets for poster production, as well as considering the required quality and durability of the poster. He compared this with the

typical cost of a quality poster printed at Kinkos, or similar chain print shops, which can be upwards of 10,000 yen. Finally, the more recent inclusion of QR codes on posters was discussed as a way of expanding information and linking to outside content while keeping the poster clutter-free.

Most provocatively perhaps was Gagnon's discussion of the unique space posters inhabit as distinct from a presentation or paper. A poster can introduce early stages of research or pilot studies and offers a unique chance to engage with the audience. Ideally, a poster presentation is interactive and dynamic, inviting input, feedback, and even pushback from conference attendees. This discourse can serve as a valuable tool for refining subsequent output.

Finally, Gagnon imparted that visuals are the key to a good poster, and they should help tell a story by answering questions such as "So what?," "Why is this important?," "To whom?," and "Is this important now, or in the future as well?" The poster should be simple and readily understood by someone outside the field, and it should either stand on its own, or serve as a platform for "the 30-second elevator pitch."

**Strategies for effective presentations**

The final presentation, by Daniel Beck, titled "No More Bullet(s): Presentation Workshop for Academics," began with excellent if often overlooked advice: When giving a presentation, "Do the things you tell your students to do": Maintain good posture, utilize effective gestures, make eye contact with the audience, and use voice inflection to make the presentation's delivery more engaging. Beck continued by incorporating design principles and insight from neuroscience to give practical advice on the creation of effective presentations and "avoid DBP (Death by PowerPoint)."

Beck introduced design principles as adapted from the indispensable *The Non-designer's Design Book* (Williams, 2015) follow the useful acronym CRAP:

- Contrast- Make differences sizeable to draw attention to what matters. Contrast can be achieved through differences in size, color, font, and boldness. Sharp contrast between text and background "pops off the page." Low contrast, on the other hand, is not effective and may even look like a mistake. High contrast looks intentional; if the aim is to differentiate, make the contrast striking.

- Repetition- Repeat elements of design for unity and cohesion. Templates can be useful for this.
- Alignment- Line up items with each other to achieve a visual connection. Unaligned items can be disturbing for the viewer, leading the viewer's brain to feel something is not quite right. Alignment can be achieved in a number of ways. For many, the default is centering text. Beck explains centered text is fine; it's safe, but it's also boring. He encouraged considering left and right alignment as well and demonstrated how they can be alternatives that are aesthetically pleasing as well as interesting.
- Proximity- Related items should be grouped together, with line spacing for example, to improve a presentation's clarity.

Beck's design suggestions when incorporating images included the use of negative space, the rule of thirds, and image bleed. The inclusion of negative space, or white space, makes slides more aesthetically pleasing and provocative. This is the opposite of a crowded slide. Similarly, the rule of thirds states that the focal point of an image should not be centered, but should be offset and take up approximately a third of the slide. Image bleed is when the image appears to go off the edge of the slide; it is not framed. This is engaging because the viewer's brain is inclined to "fill in" the rest of the image, thus capturing the one's attention.

When including graphs and charts, Beck suggested that presentations needn't necessarily follow "proper" American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, and that in fact an APA-style graph or chart is often quite dull in the context of a presentation. For line charts, for example, a layering effect can be utilized for clarity. Layering highlights only the line being discussed, while the other lines are "muted," still visible to the viewer but in a softer shade. Beck also recommended using cues from Twitter and other forms of social media to explicitly label graphs and charts for maximum impact, and not to hesitate to override the default settings of any template software being used.

Beck provided a series of negative examples to promote more effective presentations. First, excessive bullet points should be avoided, especially a series of bullet points presented at once when the presenter intends to address them one by one. If the audience is reading point five while the presenter is talking about point two, for example, there is an inherent disconnect between audience and presenter. A better approach is to reveal the points in

succession, as an element of surprise engages the audience. Beck encouraged the presenter to embrace a "1 slide= 1 idea" principle and to focus the slides on compelling images so the audience is listening to the words of the presenter. Next, Beck cautioned against using distracting backgrounds recommending a simple black or white monochrome instead. Similarly, animation should be utilized judiciously; not necessarily avoided, but with purpose and in a way that is adding to rather than distracting from the presentation. Finally, Beck recommended against framing images, and instead suggested utilizing the design suggestions above- negative space, the rule of thirds, and image bleed.

Other useful suggestions centered around the importance of designing presentations for clarity in the *back* of the room. Suggestions included: using larger text than you might think necessary (probably 36 as an absolute minimum); using sans serif fonts including Helvetica, Gill sans, Arial, Futura, Optima or Rockwell; and being aware of image resolution (usually 1024 by 768) and how the image is affected by resizing.

A compelling recurring theme emphasized by Beck was the idea that an academic presentation should be viewed as its own entity. It is not merely reading a paper; it should be thought of as a commercial or advertisement for a paper. The presenter shouldn't feel bound by APA conventions, but rather should focus the presentation on making maximum impact. Beck even suggested that the visual aspect of a presentation could be paused or blacked out in intervals to bring attention back to the speaker. As a final related practical consideration, Beck recommended against handing out a booklet of the presentation, especially before the presentation as this could diminish engagement. He acknowledged some kind of handout may be expected, but this handout can be viewed as a separate stand-alone reference, not a carbon copy of the presentation.

**Conclusion**

As CELE teacher researchers, we are responsible for completing yearly projects which often consist of presenting or publishing our research, but we have varying levels of experience with this, and initiating projects may be a challenge. In addition to CELE requirements, most of us have an incentive to broaden our professional experience and strengthen our CVs for the next stage of our careers and for our own professional development. It is the hope of this author that the presentations summarized in this paper offer insight into this process.

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Thank you to Jamie Taylor, Wendy M. Gough, Greg Gagnon and Daniel Beck for sharing their insight and expertise and to West Tokyo JALT for putting together such an informative and worthwhile workshop. Best of luck to all readers as you incorporate these great tips and strategies into your future research.

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